

STONE MEN OF MALEKULA

301 dicate that they have recently taken part in a certain type of Maki rite, or that they have secretly carried out a certain act of sorcery against persons unknown—a cheap type of self-advertisement apt, however, to be imitated by those only wishing to gain a reputation for occult power; or an old man may by similar means demonstrate to an admiring world the fact that he has sacrificed more than one home-bred circle-tusker.¹

Forms of greeting.

151 Before reaching the village the average native knows from footprints who has already returned, for each man's footprints are known. In the case of a woman, it is more than likely that he knows also, from the impress of her foot, what load she has been carrying.

576 Meeting an individual or a party on the path, there is little need to speculate whither they come, for the polite formula of greeting is, "Where have you come from?" or "Where are you going?" Nor, under ordinary circumstances, will the question be evaded, since not only is it the custom to tell, but it would also be futile to conceal, since so many indications, as well as the publicity under which all members of the community live, make checking up on any individual's whereabouts easy. Gossip, too, spreads quickly and surely, and only sorcerers and adulterers have real need to conceal their movements.

Fire-making.

262 Once home, the first concern is the cooking of the evening meal, the most important in the day, since breakfast consists usually of bits left over from the night before, and the midday meal is made of yams roasted over an open fire close to the gardens where they work. Each house has in it, an earth-oven, a simple hole dug in the ground. In this a fire burns all night, for warmth and to keep off stray ghosts. It also serves to keep away mosquitoes. Strong eyes are needed to resist the pungent, ubiquitous smoke whose only exit is through the interstices of the rain-proof thatched roof.

372 Fires rarely go out, since embers are carefully preserved. When new fire is needed, however, either at home or always when abroad, it must be made by the "plough" method. A flat soft-wood board is placed on the ground, and the fire-maker keeps this in place by kneeling on the nearer end, while, with a hard-wood stick about eight inches long gripped in both hands, he rubs backwards and forwards with it till a groove is formed in the board. This movement begins comparatively slowly, till the soft wood-dust formed by the friction begins to gather at the further end of the groove. Then the movement becomes faster and faster, till the increased friction results in a minute smouldering spark igniting the

¹ Such tuskers are more valuable if bred at home than if acquired by trade (see p. 242).

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dust. Dry leaves kept at hand are then swiftly placed over the spark, and fanned by blowing into a flame. Under favourable and absolutely dry conditions fire can be made by this method in under a minute. But it is hard work, and the European trying for the first time may work for five minutes before getting a flame.

Ritual fires and sex dichotomy. Position of strangers.

There is no family gathering for the meal, however, for one of the fundamental principles underlying society in these islands is that those who have performed the Maki rite, that is to say practically the whole male population, have thereby become so holy that they may not eat with women. This sex dichotomy which decrees that all the men, apart from small boys who have not yet taken their first step in the Maki, must eat separately from women, is one of the most marked features of Small Island society, and has far-reaching results. It is largely bound up with the question of fires, which in themselves, when lit by a member of the Maki hierarchy, are holy. Thus one of the chief acts at the moment of consecration during this rite is the lighting of a new fire, with brands from which (according to one account) the oven on which his meals are henceforth to be cooked must be kindled. Tales dealing with the miraculous origin of certain fires as related on Atchin will be given in a later volume.

One of the results of this sanctity of fires, which affected the writer's entire outlook and conditioned much of his work, was the fact that he himself, not having taken Maki rank, was unsanctified. He was therefore unable to eat with the men, nor could he eat with women, since had he done this he would have been classed as one and therefore automatically debarred from knowledge of men's secret rites. So he was forced to eat alone. This resulted in practically no contact with women, and in the fact that, lacking the ordinary meal-time companionship which in other countries, and indeed among themselves within the sex ban, is the time of greatest sociability, his attention was largely concentrated on the more formal, ritual life of the natives, of which this fire ban is one of the most salient characteristics.

It is therefore not as an honoured guest that the stranger from outside the closed ranks of the Maki hierarchy will be received at meal-time, but as a stranger from a different world, tolerated on account of his personality and his adherence to a race that may indeed be superior in many other ways, but yet one outside the pale of communal eating, to whom it is no insult not to offer food, for the simple reason that it is impossible.

If, thus, it is desired to make a correct approach, meal-times are to be avoided as bringing too obviously to the fore the abyss separating the holy from the unclean who have never, by means of sacrifice, wiped out the stain of having, as boys, eaten with women. There are, it is true,